

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

The Corruption of God's Love

Scripture: Isaiah 45:7; Amos 3:6

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How do we reconcile the concept of a loving God with a fallen world full of evil, suffering, and catastrophe? In scholarly terms, that perplexing issue is known as the problem of theodicy.

Silence Is the Wrong Answer

And for many preachers, that question is just too difficult. For them, the way to deal with it is to *not* deal with it—as if their silence will make the questions go away. But church leaders who refuse to answer the dilemma don't shield their congregations from the difficulty of theodicy. Rather, they end up throwing their church members—especially young believers—to the wolves of Darwinian evolution and militant atheism.

These days, high school and college education is riddled with anti-Christian agendas. And academic unbelief delights in the problem of theodicy—it's the smoking gun as far as they're concerned. And they'll gladly use it to impugn the God they deny. Richard Dawkins, the rock star of modern atheism, uses theodicy to spew forth his hatred of God (as if that proves He doesn't exist):

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. [1] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 1st Mariner Books ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) 51.

I've seen many young professing believers fall prey to arguments like Dawkins's. Their pastors' efforts to shield them from tough theological questions only made them sitting ducks in the secular world. Shying away from biblical tension only leaves a void for someone else to fill.

Open Theism Is the Wrong Answer

While atheists use the problem of theodicy to *impugn* God's character, bad theologians have used it to *alter* His character. Wherever they see conflict between God's love and another of His attributes, the offending attribute is jettisoned or altered.

Open Theism is a prime example. It is a relatively new theological "innovation" designed to address theodicy. Open theists see no compatibility between a loving God and one who knows the future—especially when the future includes tragedies and disasters. Open theists like Greg Boyd try to argue that God is surprised by these events—He just didn't see them coming:

It is true that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). This means that in the open view things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose. In this view, "trusting in God" provides no assurance that everything that happens to us will reflect his divine purposes. [2] Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 153.

But does that really get God off the hook for bad things that happen? And does it solve the riddle of theodicy? *No* and *No*. Boyd leaves us with a god who offers a diminished form of love that can be overwhelmed by random future catastrophes. Open Theism is nothing less than a blasphemous perversion of the one true God—the God who numbers every hair (Matthew 10:30), names all the stars (Psalm 147:4), and knows every word—before they are even uttered (Psalm 139:1–4).

Impotence Is the Wrong Answer

Implicit in Open Theism's denial of God's sovereignty and determinative will is also the denial of His supreme power. If God doesn't know what's going to happen, then He's also powerless to *stop it* from happening. And that's Tony Campolo's key argument for why catastrophic events happen.

Campolo—who is a pastor, presidential advisor, and professing evangelical—doesn't like the idea of God being sovereign over cataclysmic disasters. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Campolo thought he could defend God's loving nature by [undermining another of His attributes](#):

Unfortunately, there are a lot of bad answers. One such answer is that somehow all suffering is a part of God's great plan. . . . Statements like that dishonor God, and are responsible for driving more people away from Christianity than all the arguments that atheistic philosophers could ever muster. When the floods swept into the Gulf Coast, God was the first one who wept. . . . Certainly, God would not create suffering for innocent people, who were—for the most part—Katrina's victims. Perhaps we would do well to listen to the likes of Rabbi Harold Kushner, who contends that God is not really as powerful as we have claimed. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures does it say that God is omnipotent.

Tony Campolo is right only insofar as the word "omnipotent" doesn't appear in the Bible. But neither does the word "Trinity." Omnipotence—the quality of having all power—is an attribute of God that is derived from what the Bible comprehensively says about Him: "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3). Indeed the Lord Jesus testified to what Scripture repeatedly acknowledges: "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Conversely, Luke 1:37 says that "nothing will be impossible with God."

By arguing against an omnipotent God, Campolo ends up advocating a god whose love is impotent—a god who is no match for evil calamities like Katrina. But the sovereign God of Scripture tells us the truth about Himself: "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?" (Amos 3:6). "The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these" (Isaiah 45:7).

In reality, men like Greg Boyd and Tony Campolo are nothing more than idolaters masquerading as theologians. One wonders if they have even paused to consider how much comfort their theology really offers. Think about it: What helps you to sleep better at night? A god who's surprised by a cancer diagnosis, weeps over His inability to thwart a hurricane, and crosses His fingers during

elections. Or the God who promises that He is orchestrating every event—whether good or bad—for the ultimate good of His people and furtherance of His glory (Romans 8:28; 11:33–36).

Submission Is the Right Answer

Wrong answers won't do when it comes to the hard questions about God's love. John MacArthur reasons that, instead, we must trust God and His providential working in all of life's circumstances:

We cannot assume we know the meaning or purpose of every fortune or disaster that befalls. Often the unrighteous seem to prosper and experience God's goodness: "The tents of the destroyers prosper, and those who provoke God are secure, whom God brings into their power" (Job 12:6). "I have seen a violent, wicked man spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil" (Psalm 37:35). "Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth" (Psalm 73:12). So what often seems like divine blessing is no proof of God's favor. Don't think for a moment that prosperity is proof of divine approval. Those who think in those terms are prone to go astray.

On the other hand, the righteous frequently suffer: "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). But God uses such suffering to accomplish much good: "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

In other words, the very thing that seems good will end in evil for the impenitent and unbelieving. But for God's own children, even trouble and discipline are intended for good (Genesis 50:20). Therefore the greatest disaster from our perspective may actually be a token of God's lovingkindness. [3] John MacArthur, *The God Who Loves* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 92–93.

It should not be lost on us that the worst event in history was also the best thing that ever happened. The cross of Christ was the result of the most evil conspiracy ever concocted. A justice system run by corrupt men was able to pass the sentence of death on the most innocent and righteous man who ever lived. And yet, as the greatest ever demonstration of His love, God sovereignly orchestrated the entire crucifixion as the means by which we could inherit eternal life (Acts 4:27–28).

Amid the ugliness and evil of Calvary, not even the disciples could see the glorious goal God was accomplishing. We should not settle for the same kind of spiritual blindness—we must take confidence from both God's love and His sovereignty, and submit to His will, even when we can't fully grasp it.

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